

Fire Suppression Committee
Sen. Cobb's Recommendations and Options
April 2008

Major Option # 1.

If there are no major changes in how the federal government agencies will continue to fight fires as they do, with their limited resources, conflicting values by the public and Congress, etc., as outlined in the Outlook of Fire report then the following should be done.

1. It should be made clear to homeowners that they are on their own on major fires that may affect them.
2. The state should get more state money to have more resources to fight fires on its own with less help from the federal government.
3. Either the legislature puts up more money to fight fires or we cap the total spending of wildland fires from forestlands that go onto state and private lands to avoid the 50-100 million dollar cost that will occur.
4. The state must sooner or later decide to put out fires on federal lands when they first start to avoid the larger costs on state lands as the costs for wildfires on state and private lands go up.
5. Either the state must stop people from building near forestlands or put restrictions on how houses should be built or simply say it can't because of limited resources save all the homes. However, the state is still faced with fires on existing homes and communities that still will cost more and more to fight.
6. If the federal government will not provide money for fuel thinning near communities, then either the communities must tax themselves to do so or the state must help pay for the fuel thinning near communities and large developments.
7. The additional cost of preparing for fires paid more by the state will likely be around \$10 million per year for fuel reduction, hiring full time contractors during fire seasons, and an expanded number of engines for state and local governments. These costs are the preparation for fires and trying to prevent small fires from becoming large ones. Again though, if fires are allowed to expand on federal lands, the state will fund a much higher cost of the yearly fire costs to protect homes and communities, which will probably be \$20-\$40 million per year in normal years in the future.
8. Those who make a livelihood off grass and private timber are basically toast. There is no insurance that is subsidized or affordable for those people. With the limited number of resources and if these fires start on federal lands, there is little federal priority to fight those fires on private grasslands and timberlands. Unless the state and local governments have more resources, it will be hard to fight large fires without federal monies.

9. The state must sooner or later fund the fires upfront with its own money so it can control the costs of fires when they come out of the federal lands. Unless the state does so, the costs will be pushed further and further on Montana taxpayers with the federal agencies running how the fires are fought.
10. At some point the state of Montana is going to have to increase fire funding at a state level to fight fires regardless of what the federal government does. We have a growing aging population, declining small towns and hence smaller volunteer fire fighting capabilities. We will need to have state fire teams to fight fires regardless of where the fire starts. This is going to cost \$5-\$8 million per year to have expansion of fire teams in the state.
11. It is imperative we keep some logging and logging people in this state. Once most of them are gone, all options of thinning and some logging will be gone.

Major Option #2

1. If the federal government is clearer in communicating to the public its fire policies, that is a good starting point to for the state and local governments to know where the fires can be fought with our resources.
2. Ideally the federal government would subsidize or buy insurance or simply pay for grass loss and private timber loss and fences and perhaps subsidize loss of business insurance for others and let the fires simply burn out.
3. The federal and state governments should pay for fuel reduction on state lands and private lands near communities and developments and let the state decide where to do so. An amount of \$10 million each year for 5 years would be a good target.
4. Homeowners would clearly understand their responsibility when fires erupt -- not just on preparing their homes and lands but also safety, evacuations, etc.
5. The state also needs to clearly explain to the public what it can and cannot do with its resources.
6. The local fire departments need to clearly explain to the public what they can and cannot do with their fire equipment and resources in case of fires both large and small.
7. If there are going to be fee increases or zoning laws for buildings, then it must be clear just what protection government will give homeowners in exchange for those added fees and taxes.

Regarding Funding

1. The state needs approximately \$2-\$3 million per year in additional funding for additional resources as set out in the request from DNRC for this year.

2. Fuel reduction needs to be funded at about \$10 million per year from state and federal funds, mainly from the federal funds where federal forestlands are adjacent to state and private communities.
3. The state of Montana needs a fire fund to fight fires. We can no longer wait for the federal government to decide on how much to pay us back. It is cheaper to put the funds up front and allow the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation to prepare and fight fires upfront and not look for resources during the fire season. It would be easier to contract for services ahead of time than during the fire season when they are needed immediately. This fund should be an amount, which is the 7-year average of state fire costs minus the high and low, which would be around \$15 million each year right now.
4. In the end we should as a state and federal government save about one-half to one-third of what we spent in the fire seasons from fires from non-state and private lands in the previous years. The federal fire agencies would save the vast majority, which would allow them--if Congress would authorize it-- to pay for fire damage to grass, timber, and fences, allow for money for fuel reductions around communities, and allow them to run their departments instead of using department money to fund fire costs each year.
5. Savings realized by the state will be needed to expand the state firefighting capabilities due to increased number of homes in the WUI plus the declining number of volunteer firefighters across the state due to an aging population.